



United States Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service

Supporting Organic Agriculture

2008 Farm Bill Conservation Programs

OVERVIEW

Organic farming is one of the fastest growing segments in U.S. agriculture. From 1992 through 2005, the acres of certified organic cropland rose from 403,000 to more than 1.7 million; organically certified pasture acres rose from 532,000 to over 4 million; and the total number of organic certified livestock rose from 11,000 in 1992 to over 196,000.

LEGISLATIVE CHANGES

The Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (2008 Farm Bill) highlights the availability of financial and technical assistance to help producers of all commodities meet their conservation goals. It specifically includes help to organic producers and those transitioning to organic farming.

CONSERVATION PLANNING

For more than 70 years, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS was known as the Soil Conservation Service until 1994) has placed a high priority on helping agricultural producers with conservation plans to meet their environmental and economic goals, while concurrently planning for the protection of the soil, water, air and wildlife resources. Conservation goals are highly individual and may certainly include transitioning to organic agriculture (or boosting pollinator populations, increasing biodiversity including soil-borne organisms, enhancing water quality, controlling invasive species or dozens of other resource-enhancing possibilities).

NRCS conservationists work with farmers and ranchers to come up with scientifically-sound alternatives for accomplishing their goals and working out a timeline to implement the conservation practices in the plan.

All information provided to NRCS for conservation planning purposes is strictly confidential.

Implementation of conservation practices may be partially funded through Farm Bill programs such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). In California, having a conservation plan will give applicants a higher status when applying for the competitive EQIP contracts.

California applicants will need to have or be working toward an organic system plan (OSP) when applying for EQIP. Farmers who have an OSP have typically accomplished much or all of the work needed to develop an NRCS conservation plan and thus compete for EQIP contracts on a priority basis.

EQIP FOR ORGANIC TRANSITION AND MORE

Farmers who want to apply for financial assistance supporting organic agriculture may receive assistance under a new provision of the EQIP program that allows producers to apply for up to \$20,000/year or \$80,000 over six years.

Producers are required to develop and carry out an organic system plan (OSP). In California, NRCS is setting aside a separate pool of EQIP money for organic agriculture. A large number of conservation practices may be funded using Organic Transition EQIP including nutrient management, cover crops, crop rotation, mulching, integrated pest management and hedgerow planting. Ranchers may apply for assistance installing fencing and watering for rotational grazing systems.

Farmers may also compete for general EQIP monies that allow for up to \$300,000 over six years. All the conservation practices available under Organic EQIP (and dozens more) are also available under this "General" EQIP. There will be more money available in this larger pool of funds, but there will also be more competition.



EQIP is a competitive program (one out of every two to three applications is funded on the average) and projects are generally ranked for environmental benefits; producers interested in organic systems should realize significant environmental benefits.

SPECIAL SITUATIONS

Most EQIP contracts pay producers 75 percent of the cost of structures or management. Benefits for organic producers may be higher due to the typically greater costs involved in farming organically. Additionally, those who have farmed less than 10 years are considered beginning farmers and are eligible for 75 percent cost share. Those with limited financial resources (defined on a county by county basis) can receive up to 90 percent of the costs of conservation practices.

CONSERVATION STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM

Farmers cannot be paid retroactively through EQIP for conservation work they have already undertaken. However, producers with comprehensive conservation systems on their farm or ranch should be well positioned to participate in the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP).

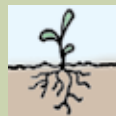
The new CSP provides technical and financial assistance to those producers who already have applied the basic conservation practices and are willing to implement a higher level of conservation on their operations. Producers participating under CSP receive incentive payments for the specified higher levels of conservation treatment.

When applying for EQIP, especially when applying for the first time, producers should be mindful that they will need to fill out forms providing USDA with information that confirms that they are eligible to participate in these public-funded programs. USDA employees can help with the legal and financial forms that will make it possible to receive funding. Most of these forms are not required for farmers requesting technical assistance.

For more information on EQIP and other Farm Bill programs please visit the NRCS California website at:
www.ca.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/

Top Organic Practices Used By NRCS Customers

NRCS offers technical and financial assistance on conservation practices for organic agriculture. Here are the top conservation practices implemented on organic farms in CA:



NUTRIENT MANAGEMENT

Managing the amount, source, placement, form, and timing of application of plant nutrients and soil amendments.



COVER CROP

Growing grasses, legumes, and forbs for seasonal cover, erosion control, soil quality, nutrient cycling, biodiversity, and weed suppression.



PEST MANAGEMENT

Utilizing environmentally sensitive prevention and suppression strategies to manage weeds, insects, diseases, and other organisms that cause damage.



MULCHING

Using ground cover to manage soil moisture, soil temperature, erosion, and weeds. Provides vegetative cover, and improves soil condition.



IRRIGATION WATER MANAGEMENT

Determining and controlling the rate, amount, and timing of irrigation water in a planned and efficient manner.



FENCING

Establishing a fence serves as a constructed barrier to livestock, wildlife, or people. Regulates animal movement for improved pasture productivity.



HEDGEROW PLANTING

Establishing a line of dense vegetation to provide wildlife habitat, increase carbon storage, and provide dust barrier. May act as a habitat for beneficial insects and pollinators.



CONSERVATION COVER

Maintaining a permanent vegetative cover to reduce soil erosion while improving water, air, and soil quality; pest management; and adding wildlife habitat.



CONSERVATION CROP ROTATION

Growing crops in recurring sequence on same field to control soil erosion, aid soil quality, manage plant nutrients, and improve water efficiency.